DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 233 UD 024 583

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TITLE K-12: What the Data Show about Public Education in Minnesota.
INSTITUTION Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.
PUB DATE Oct 85
NOTE 6p.; Photographs may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT CURA Reporter; v15 n4 Oct 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Equity (Finance); *Educational Finance; Educational Planning; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Education; *Student Characteristics; *Teacher Morale
IDENTIFIERS *Minnesota

ABSTRACT

An ongoing study has identified four major problems in Minnesota's public education system: (1) Minnesota schools are being asked to provide racial integration, special educational services, and other additional responsibilities at the same time that the school system is contracting as a result of demographic, political, and economic trends. (2) Although Minnesota teachers earn slightly more than the national average, a recent survey revealed that 58 percent are dissatisfied with their jobs. (3) Significant financial disparities between the state's school districts restrict educational opportunities, and recent legislation has overturned earlier measures addressing this problem. (4) Minnesota students have changed: perhaps the most important challenge to public education is coping with a student population whose circumstances of life are dramatically different from their parents and older siblings. The four problems outlined in this paper have been overshadowed by other issues whose centrality within the current public debate may not be justified. (KH)

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K-12: What the Data Show About Public Education in Minnesota

by Thomas R. Peek

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Minnesota has been drawn into the debate about the quality of public education sweeping the country. Minnesotans have assembled commissions and task forces, initiated reform proposals, and lobbied state and local officials for change. At the University of Minnesota an ongoing study has been examining Minnesota's public education system in the elementary and secondary schools. The joint CURA College of Education study has identified four major problems with the current Minnesota system: fiscal constraints, teacher dissatisfaction, financial disparities, and changes in the students. To date, the education debate has paid little attention to these issues.

Minnesota Schools Asked To Do More With Less

During the 1970s and early 1980s Minnesota's school system contracted significantly as a result of demographic, political, and economic trends. First, public school enrollments declined at a rate greater than that of the nation. The decline reflects a drop in the number of school age children. Second, public education, like other public institutions, faced increasing costs, primarily, but not exclusively, as a result of inflation. Third, the schools were hit hard by fiscal constraints in the early 1980s, resulting from a financial crisis in Minnesota state government which disrupted state education aid programs, while, at the same time, federal aid to public education was diminishing.

Figure 1 shows how a ten-year pattern of school financing was disrupted beginning in school year 1981-82. The results were a retrenchment at the local level and significantly greater reliance on local property taxes for funding schools.

At the same time, numerous federal education programs were consolidated into an education block grant and a number of programs were significantly reduced, including funding for aid to the disadvantaged, child nutrition programs, and vocational education aid.

The contraction of Minnesota's public education system has caused significant changes in the system itself:

- Minnesota's total K-12 educational expenditures dropped 16.5 percent in real dollars between 1972-73 and 1982-83—a bigger decline than in most other states, including all midwestern states (Table 1). Minnesota's expenditure rankings (a comparison with other states) slipped. Even measured in per pupil expenditures in constant dollars (to account for enrollment declines), Minnesota's 21.8 percent increase during the period was below the national average and was a smaller increase than in all other midwestern states. In addition, expenditures for Minnesota elementary and secondary education have become a much smaller portion of the state budget, having dropped from 40 percent to 27 percent between 1971-73 and 1983-85.
- Minnesota experienced a net loss of about 5,000 licensed staff between 1973-74 and 1982-83, reflecting two trends—declining enrollments in the 1970s and fiscal constraints in the early 1980s.
- With tenure and seniority protections in place, staff reductions have resulted in hiring fewer new teachers, laying off newer teachers first, and filling fewer retirement-created openings. As a result, the median age of Minnesota's licensed staff increased from 35.4 in 1973-74 to 41.5 in 1982-83.
- Salary increases gained by Minnesota teachers during the 1970s and early 1980s were not sufficient to keep up with inflation, diminishing their purchasing power by 7 percent between 1972-73 and 1982-83. This occurred despite the fact that those teachers remaining in the system after the fiscal crisis were older, with more experience and training, and therefore entitled to higher average salaries.
- The number of schools in Minnesota declined by 18 percent between 1971-72 and 1982-83 as a result of two trends—declining enrollments and fiscal constraints.

During the same period, Minnesota schools were asked to take on substantial additional responsibilities. They were required to foster racial integration, eliminate sex discrimination, and improve access for the handicapped. They broadened the age group they were serving through community education and through early childhood

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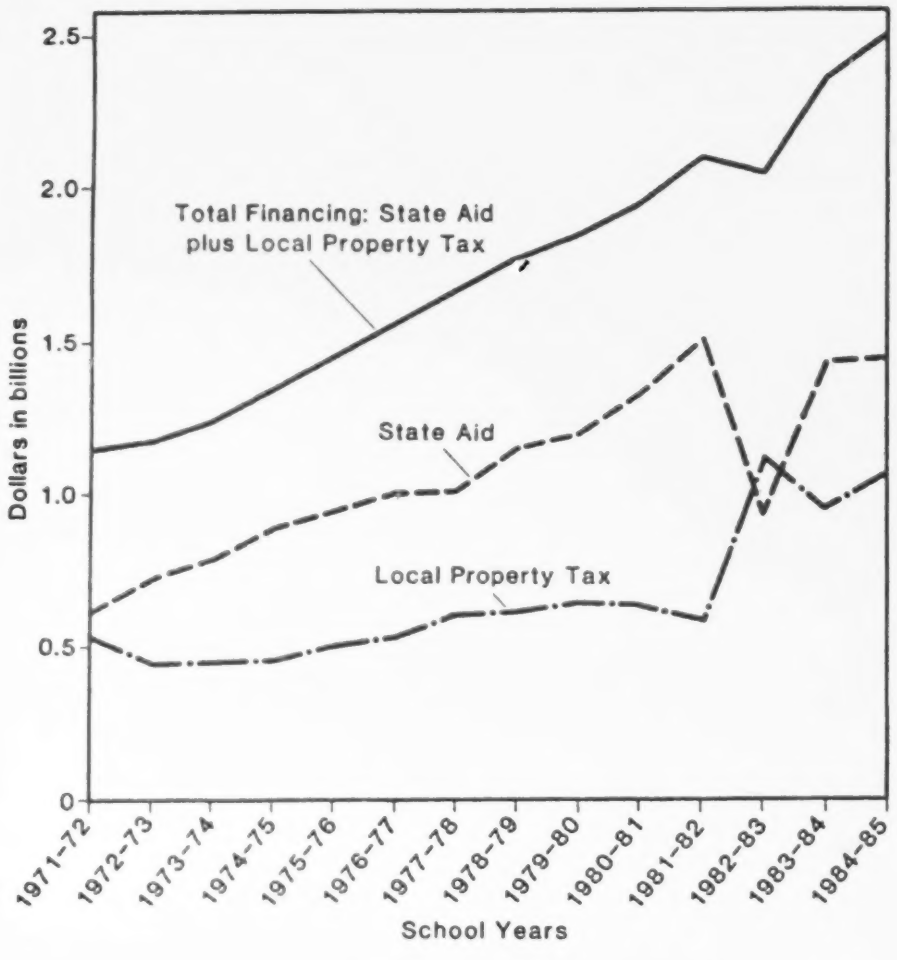
Figure 1. MINNESOTA SCHOOL FINANCING



and family education programs. They were asked to provide special programs for gifted and talented children. All of these changes increased public school responsibilities, expanding the role of public education in Minnesota life.

Teacher Dissatisfaction Is Apparent

The national literature on public education has identified a variety of factors leading to teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs. To what degree do Minnesota teachers face the same circumstances? Minnesota teachers' salaries are slightly higher than those in most other states. The average teacher salary in Minnesota was $22,296 in 1982-83 compared to a national average of $20,531 for the nation as a whole. But teacher salaries, both in Minnesota and nationally, have failed to keep up with the inflation of the last decade. How these salaries rank with those of other Minnesota professions was not determined here, but relative to comparable professions nationally, Minnesota teachers fare only slightly better than their national counterparts. In addition, the career ladder for teachers in Minnesota is similar to what it is nationally. Beginning salaries are lower than virtually all other professions requiring a college degree and salary ceilings are reached much sooner and at a much lower level than for other college-educated workers.

A recent survey of Minnesota public school teachers revealed that 58 percent are dissatisfied with their jobs, one-third are satisfied, and just over 9 percent are highly satisfied. The factors these teachers identified as contributing to dissatisfaction include their pay, the amount of work they do, the lack of chance for advancement on the job, the way school policies are put into practice, and the lack of praise they get for doing the job.

Significant Financial Disparities Continue to Exist

A major aspect of the reform movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was improving educational opportunity by trying to minimize financial disparities among Minnesota's school districts. In 1971, a constitutional court challenge of the state's school finance system, *Van Dusartz v. Priest,* reinforced the belief held by some that reliance on local property wealth for funding public schools was creating unequal educational opportunities for Minnesota children. As a result of this concern (and the concern about rising local property taxes) Minnesota's school finance system was reformed. The state's contribution to school district revenue was increased by substantially raising the foundation aid level and placing a limitation on taxes that a district could raise against real property. Additional property tax relief was also provided.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the legislature modified the finance system in ways that again increased reliance on local property taxes as well as increasing expenditure and tax rate disparities. These changes were particularly significant during the state's financial crisis of 1981 and 1982. Recent studies show that these modifications have significantly undermined the effort to minimize financial disparities among districts. In fact, the levels of disparity in per pupil revenues and expenditures in the early 1980s remained virtually the same as they were in the early 1970s when the dis-

Table 1. CHANGE IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EXPENDITURES, 1972-73 TO 1982-83*

	Total Expenditures (percent change)	Per Pupil Expenditures (percent change)	Per Pupil Expenditures as a percent of Per Capita Income (percent point change)
MINNESOTA	−16.5	21.8	3.4
Iowa	−3.3	30.6	6.4
Kansas	14.0	49.5	7.6
Nebraska	−5.7	37.3	7.6
North Dakota	25.0	61.8	9.4
South Dakota	−5.7	30.3	4.9
Wisconsin	2.0	34.3	7.4
UNITED STATES	−1.6	28.8	3.7

*Based on constant 1972 dollars.

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parity problem was first addressed.

Figure 2 presents the history of the financial disparities from 1970-71 through 1982-83. While the dollar gap between the high spending districts (95th percentile) and low spending districts (5th percentile) has grown significantly since 1970-71, the ratio of the high to low spending districts has remained virtually unchanged throughout the period.

Minnesota Students Have Changed

Perhaps the most important challenge to public education is to find ways to cope with a student population whose circumstances of life are dramatically different from those of their parents or possibly even their older siblings:

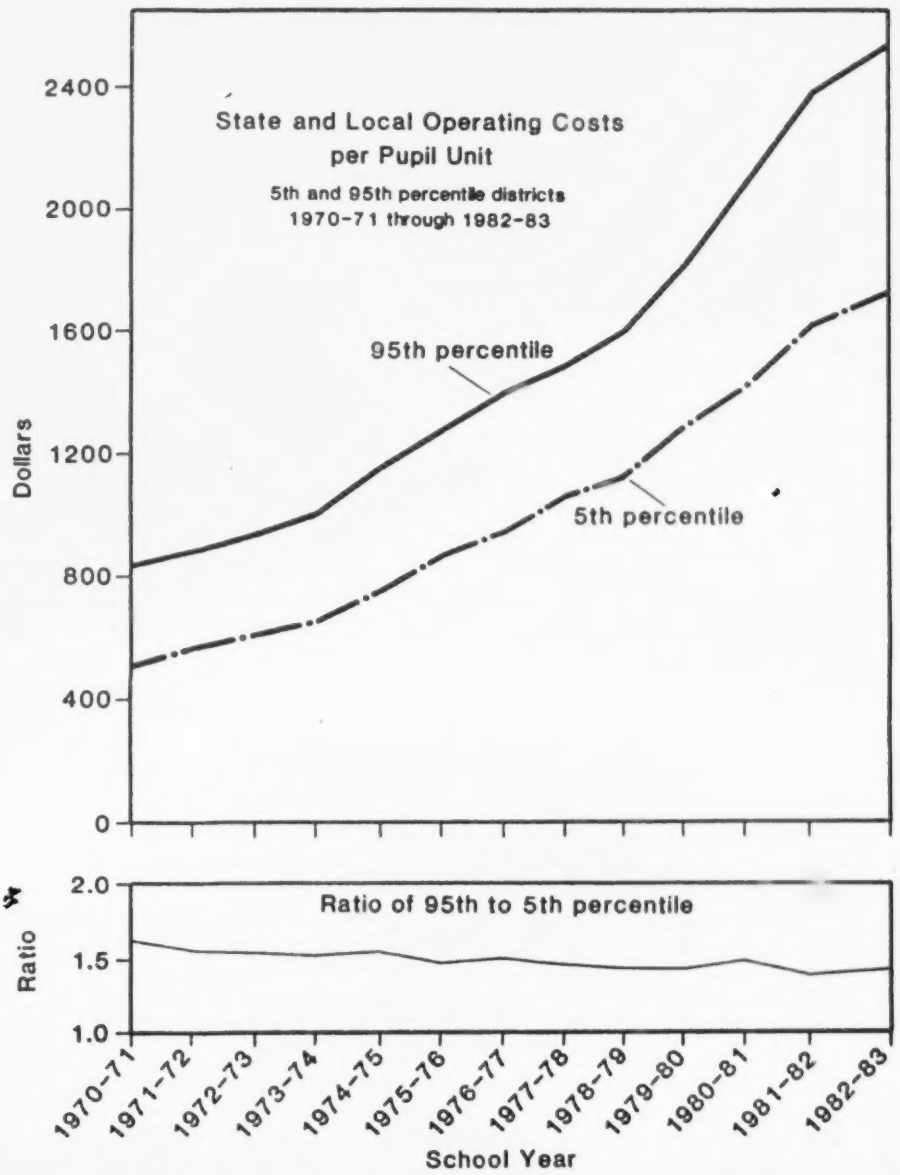
- Minnesota children live in families that have changed dramatically. Increasingly, they come from homes in which both parents work (almost 60 percent of Minnesota families), or from homes where there is only one parent, or from homes where families are blended, due to remarriage.
- Use of, and exposure to, alcohol and drugs is common among Minnesota school children, particularly high schoolers.
- More children are becoming involved in sexual activity at earlier ages than in the past. Nationally, the average age at the time of first sexual experience is sixteen and by the time children are nineteen only one-fifth of the males and one-third of the females have not had intercourse.
- Children read less and watch television more. In fact, the average United States student spends more time watching television than in school.
- Seventy percent of Minnesota's sixteen and seventeen year olds work fifteen to twenty hours a week during the school year. This has made some youth "prematurely affluent" and created a significant distraction from school involvement.
- Minnesota teachers report significant changes in the attitudes of school-age youth. They see today's elementary students as more aware and knowledgeable than their counterparts of ten to twenty years ago. They see today's secondary students as less intellectually curious and less inquisitive than the earlier students. Teachers also observe that both elementary and secondary students are more assertive, expressive, self-assured, and more likely to challenge authority and criticize school than they were ten or twenty years ago. They say that today's students have a strong need to be entertained and expect immediate gratification for personal and educational desires, they have shorter attention spans, and they have an insatiable need for attention. Students are less willing to put forth effort to learn and are motivated more by external rather than internal rewards than the earlier students.
- Nationally, student misbehavior is perceived by parents, teachers, and students as the biggest problem in elementary, junior high, and high schools. Research indicates these problems reflect factors primarily outside, rather than inside the schools, such as the disruption of families and the level of social control exerted by parents.

These social changes and their impact on children are of critical importance to Minnesota's public education system. First, the schools are affected day-to-day by the presence of these changes in the children attending school. This influences the efficacy of schools' educational efforts and the difficulty of their tasks. Second, schools can, and often have, served as an intervening force to ameliorate the problems growing out of some of these social changes. Both are important aspects of a major challenge for Minnesota public education—to cope with the changing nature of the children it seeks to educate.

Current Debate Needs Refocus

None of the four problems identified by the CURA/College of Education study, and dis-

Figure 2. FISCAL DISPARITIES AMONG MINNESOTA SCHOOL DISTRICTS



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cussed here, have been thoroughly analyzed in the current Minnesota debate on public education, largely because other issues have been emphasized. However, examination of these other issues reveals that the major concerns of the reform advocates are not strongly linked to the existing research base, and in some cases, actually contradict what is known about the state's K-12 system.

First, the Minnesota discussion is fueled by a widespread perception that Minnesotans are dissatisfied with their public education system, believing that the quality of the schools has deteriorated in recent years. Yet, despite all the public attention focused on Minnesota public education, the vast majority of Minnesotans rate their schools highly. In a survey conducted for this project by the University's Minnesota Center for Social Research, almost 80 percent of a statewide sample rated Minnesota schools as "good" or "excellent," a far more favorable rating than Americans give the schools in the nation as a whole. And, less than one-third of the sample said Minnesota's schools are worse than they were ten years ago.

Second, a major problem often cited by critics is the performance of Minnesota students on standardized achievement tests. Much of the concern about student performance resulted from a study by Berman, Weiler Associates, a consultant to the Minnesota Business Partnership. A review of that study, prepared as a part of this project, raises serious questions about some of the conclusions drawn from it. A close reading of the study, particularly Berman, Weiler's extensive evaluation of the limitations of the existing data on Minnesota student performance, indicates that it is impossible to make definitive conclusions about student performance in Minnesota. In addition, the CURA/College of Education review indicates that if any deficiencies do exist they may be related to forces external to the schools, such as those noted, but not adequately discussed in the Berman, Weiler study. What is needed are other, more reliable measures of student performance as well as means for determining the impact of any external forces on student performance and school quality.

Third, some critics assert that the costs of Minnesota's public education system have grown inordinately in recent years and that Minnesotans are getting less while paying more for public education. In fact, Minnesota's K-12 system has experienced more than a decade of contraction caused by inflation and fiscal constraints imposed primarily by state government, as well as declining enrollments. At the same time Minnesota schools have had to assume significant and costly new responsibilities, making the claim that the schools are doing less with more particularly ironic.

Fourth, some critics of Minnesota public education focus on the organizational structures of public schools. The evidence for asserting that organizational change in schools results in improved quality and/or reduced costs is not definitive, although there is some indication that positive results occur with "school-based management." Experience with greater parent-student choice systems is quite limited, though Minneapolis is now developing data on its experience with an expanded choice model. Proposals that urge more radical restructuring of the system are instead based on a more general critique of bureaucratic institutions which, the critics argue, the public schools have become. Most proposals for structural change oversimplify the total system of governance for Minnesota's public education. Unrecognized, in particular, is the role played by school boards and the importance of student engagement and cooperation in the education process.

Fifth, many critics emphasize student academic achievement as the only goal of

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public education. Without question that is a central goal for most, perhaps the primary goal of the system, and it should be at the heart of any reform considerations. However, in addition to academic achievement, there are other, non-academic goals that have also been important to public education and around which much of what happens in the schools revolve. These non-academic goals include proper socialization, surrogate parenting, and opportunities for non-scholastic experiences. Reflecting these goals are numerous school activities including formal and informal student counseling; ongoing student disciplinary action; special education; extracurricular activities; and regular classes in health, sex education, drug education, drivers education, and other areas. These activities give the school many more dimensions than just those of an academic learning center.

The failure to fully appreciate the non-academic functions of public education has important implications for school reform. For example, responding to the problems of the changing student will involve the non-academic aspects of public education. Indeed it is possible that, given the changing student, academic improvement can be achieved only through strategies associated with the non-academic activities of the system.

Minnesota has a tradition of continually reexamining and reforming its public institutions and there are few institutions where this is as important a task as with the public schools. This makes the current debate about the schools critically important to the future of the state and its citizens. Therefore, it is essential that the debate be based on a realistic assessment of the condition of the system and the challenges it faces now and in the years to come. Similarly, ongoing reform must reflect careful consideration of actual deficiencies and emerging problems and a clear understanding of the possible implications of particular reforms. The criticisms of the current debate outlined here should not encourage complacency about the schools. Rather it is hoped that they make a constructive contribution to the current efforts to make Minnesota's schools better than they have ever been.

Thomas Peek is an administrative assistant with CURA and principal staff person on the education project. A large portion of this article is a highly condensed version of the project's third publication, *Minnesota K-12 Education: The Current Debate, The Present Condition*. Readers interested in more detail are referred to that publication, which also contains a history of how the Minnesota public education system developed and a policy framework for the current system.

The Future of K-12 Public Education in Minnesota.

This project, sponsored jointly by CURA and the College of Education, began in the summer of 1983.

The central component of the project is the University of Minnesota Panel on the Future of K-12 Public Education in Minnesota, comprised of faculty members from various disciplines throughout the University with expertise and interest in public education. This faculty panel has guided the development of the project and reviewed its reports and publications. The panel is co-chaired by William J. Gardner, Dean of the College of Education and Thomas Scott, Director of CURA.

The project has published three reports: *The Bierman-Walker Study of Minnesota Student Performance: A Critical Review* (CURA 1984), *Minnesota Citizen Attitudes Toward Public Education* (CURA 1985), and *Minnesota K-12 Education: The Current Debate, The Present Condition* (CURA 1985). Copies of these reports are available from CURA (see instructions under Reporter).

The CURA/College of Education project will continue to use the faculty panel as the project develops a more comprehensive picture of public education and its possible direction.

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